

**The Bill Blackwood
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**The Formal Assessment Center: Justifications for Its Use and
Recommendations for Implementation**

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ABSTRACT

Every police organization is faced with the task of choosing officers to elevate to supervisory positions. Selecting individuals who have the requisite skill set to lead the organization through current and future challenges is essential as the demands on policing have evolved and will continue to do so. Organizations that fail to do so run the risk of not being fully successful. Historically, the task of supervisor selection has been accomplished using multiple choice cognitive ability tests, face to face interviews with commanders, or a formal assessment center (Trojanowicz, 1980).

Cognitive ability tests and interviews with command staff members have shown many drawbacks. Cognitive ability tests only show how well a candidate can recall information but do not show whether the candidate can act upon it. In person meetings with commanders, sometimes referred to as oral interview boards, can lack objectivity because the commander may favor some traits or accomplishments and past performance has little correlation to future performance (Cox, McCarney & Scaramella, 2009).

A formalized assessment center that utilizes external assessors should be used to make promotions to supervisory ranks. Research has shown that assessment centers are capable of identifying behaviors and traits that are necessary in the job role being tested for. The use of properly trained external assessors also protects organizations from claims of discrimination and shows less adverse impact on minority groups (Hale, 2016). Additionally, assessment centers reduce the incidence of internal complaints of favoritism and can measure for emotional intelligence, a trait heretofore not considered when making promotional decisions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction	1
Position	3
Counter Position	6
Recommendation	9
References.	13

INTRODUCTION

There is perhaps no more important task that a police organization must undertake than that of choosing their new leaders. Policing in the 21st century requires a keen understanding of the changing dynamics of the communities served, flexibility in terms of the services provided, and willingness to adapt to local, national and global trends in the expectations of citizens. Those that supervise in these times must have an ability to formulate strategies, flexibility to adapt as organizations evolve, a genuine desire to grow as a leader, and a robust understanding of the policies and laws that govern the actions of their subordinates.

Promotional methods that fail to identify and elevate only the best of candidates can have long-term negative effects for both the organization and the community. Yet, many police departments continue to use the same methods that they utilized decades ago. Some 30 plus years ago, it was noted that the common methods for choosing leaders in supervisory positions included written examinations with multiple-choice answers, face to face interviews and an assessment center (Trojanowicz, 1980). Today those methods are largely unchanged with a great deal of these persons owing their advancement to cognitive ability tests or impressing the current command level officers within their own department. These methods are flawed for several reasons.

Cognitive ability tests are ideal for measuring if the candidate is well versed in the internal policies of their department, local and state laws, or other written regulations. Those that can pass these tests are capable of retaining specific information and choosing the correct answer from among a group of options. These face-to-face encounters, sometimes called oral boards, are highly subjective and rely heavily on the

candidate impressing the interviewer with proficiency in the role that they currently occupy. The process relies on things like tenure, professional accolades, skills or some combination thereof to create a picture of the candidate's worthiness. The main flaw with this method is the accomplishments that make someone a successful officer are not accurate predictors of success as a supervisor. High arrest volume, quality and quantity of call answering activity and comradery with peers are not supervisory level capabilities. Despite this, many agencies depend on this method for 20% to 30% of a candidate's promotional score (Cox et al., 2009).

The only currently used promotional method that can adequately ensure that the most suitable candidates for supervisory ranks are chosen is the formal assessment center. Sadhu (2016) defines an assessment center as, "a multiple assessment of several individuals performed simultaneously by a group of trained evaluators using a variety of group and individual exercises" (para. 1). The first assessments used were by the German army between World War I and World War II to aid in their selection of officers ("What is the origin," 2016). A German psychologist by the name of Dr. Simoneit was curious why certain officers did not perform as they had predicted they would following promotion. Dr. Simoneit watched officer candidates as they performed task based tests, the predecessors of today's assessment exercises, and those that performed well on these tests were the ones chosen for promotion ("What is the origin," 2016). The merits of this selection method were recognized by the British government, and eventually the American intelligence community, who both later adopted these assessments. They found that those that scored best displayed the requisite traits of

leadership, adaptability, problem solving acumen and teamwork (“What is the origin,” 2016).

Later, in the 1950s, the American Telephone company (AT&T) in their management development programs adopted this assessment method (Sadhu, 2016). A separate building was set aside and designated to perform the candidate testing. This building became known as the “Assessment Centre”, which the process would thereafter be referred as (Sadhu, 2016). The AT&T study showed that the assessment center was successful in predicting organizational achievement. The method was eventually adopted by other companies, including IBM, Sears, Standard Oil, General Electric, and J.C. Penney (“History of Assessment,” 2018).

Choosing leaders for police agencies is too vital a task to settle for less than the ideal promotional process. It is a police agency’s obligation to select the most deserving and prepared candidates not only for the department but also for the community it serves. Law enforcement agencies should adopt a formalized assessment center process that utilizes external assessors to make promotions to supervisory ranks.

POSITION

In today’s world, public agencies are not only responsible for choosing supervisors who are capable of performing the necessary tasks of their new position, but also ensuring that the means used to advance these individuals can survive scrutiny. Human resource departments are constantly challenged by unsuccessful promotional candidates regarding the fundamental fairness of the process that saw them passed over. Among the challenges that are raised is perceived favoritism by the command staff within the organization. Officers often argue that the decision regarding

who to promote is decided before they sit down before an oral interview board. Chief executives are left to judge resumes that are often relatively equal. Depending upon whether the chief executive places more or less weight on things such as education level or tenure, one candidate is given preference over another. Additionally, organizations must always seek protection from allegations of racial, gender or other discrimination against protected classes. Discrimination claims can potentially cause organizations substantial monetary loss in the form of civil actions. These allegations, whether they are proven to be true or not, can also cause damage to the organization's reputation. A correctly run assessment center with external assessors alleviates these concerns.

The use of external assessors, who are not members of the candidates' department and therefore not part of their direct chain of command, provides multiple benefits. Manpower is at a premium in smaller departments. Having personnel from other departments perform as assessors means that these small departments do not have to pull commanders away from their primary daily duties. External assessors are asked ahead of the assessment center if they are familiar with or know personally any of the candidates. The assessors sign a document attesting to this fact. This means they can formulate their ratings based solely on the candidate's performance and not preconceived notions. This increased objectivity increases the overall credibility of the process (Whetzel & Wheaton, 2016).

Assessment centers, when properly administered with racial and gender diversity on the assessor panel, provide several protections against discrimination claims. Compared to oral examinations and written examinations there is a much smaller

incidence of adverse impact on racial, ethnic or gender groups (Hale, 2016). Cognitive ability tests have shown to disproportionately favor certain racial groups and do not produce the same diversity in promotional pools that are found following assessment centers. Candidates perceive assessment centers as being fair and unbiased (Kitaef, 2011). Aside from the insulation of discrimination charges, this diversity in candidates has other advantages for the organization. The size of minority groups in this nation is growing relative to the overall population. This means that communities will increasingly demand police departments that are representative of their ethnic and racial makeup. Assessment centers can meet this demand far better than the alternatives.

Assessments can be adapted to fill a variety of positions, to promote to any supervisory rank from sergeant all the way up to police chief (Hale, 2016). A job analysis is conducted where the position being filled is identified and examined. The attributes, behaviors and primary tasks of the position are determined and recorded to establish the dimensions that assessors will measure. Often this will require interviewing persons who currently hold the job for their input concerning their daily responsibilities. Once these dimensions are established, the exercises that will make up the assessment center are put into place. Multiple exercises are utilized to ensure that the dimensions can be measured across several situations and that candidates have numerous opportunities to simulate the behaviors within the dimensions. For example, an in-basket exercise, a peer counseling exercise and a tactical scenario may be used in a particular assessment (Sadhu, 2016).

Another benefit is that assessment centers are successful in measuring the emotional intelligence of candidates. Emotional intelligence is a psychological term that

refers to a person's ability to be aware their own emotions and feelings along with those of others and to use this information to guide their actions. Emotional intelligence has been shown in multiple studies to predict success in a work environment. Assessment centers measure social and emotional competencies that are components of emotional intelligence. These include communication, sensitivity, initiative, and interpersonal skills and are captured within the exercise dimensions (Cherniss, 2000).

COUNTER POSITION

Even with the clear advantages of assessment centers there are still issues which the opponents of this method point to. Officers and police executives alike put claims of assessor bias and unnecessary expense forth. These claims are quickly dismissed when anecdotal evidence is put to the side and scholarly research is inserted in its place.

Some officers claim that assessment centers are subjective and that certain assessors simply "like" one candidate over another. It is argued candidates who are more articulate or more confident have an inherent advantage because the assessment center is simply "role playing" as opposed to a true representation of who the individual is. Some candidates, according to assessment center opponents, simply play the game better and are rewarded for it (Hale, 2016, para. 15). The bulk of historical study into assessment centers lends some credence to this argument. Assessment centers have been shown to be weak in what is known as construct validity, which is if an assessment center accurately measures the performance dimensions it is designed to measure. In order for an assessment center to have construct validity, the same candidate should receive relatively identical ratings in the same dimension across

different exercises and should receive different ratings in the different dimensions within the same exercise. It has been found that assessors have given candidates high dimension ratings based on their overall performance in an exercise as opposed to their exhibition of behaviors that make up a particular dimension. These same candidates are not observed to have equally high ratings in that dimension in an exercise they do not perform well in overall (Lance, 2008). The implication is drawn from this is impressing a certain panel of assessors can lead to a candidate being given high dimension ratings that they may not have received from a panel that was less awed by their performance.

The lack of “construct validity” is not truly an indictment of the process though. What has been found repeatedly is, while assessors may be moved to give high dimension scores based on overall exercise performance; the final assessment scores are still quite valid. Assessment centers are very high in content validity and criterion validity. Content validity refers to whether the exercises being used are representative of the activities and tasks that the actual job will require. Criterion validity deals with how well the assessment process is an accurate predictor of future performance in the position being sought. Assessment centers are superior in terms of measuring job related competencies (Petrides et al., 2010). Furthermore, a properly run assessment center involves several days of assessor training. Assessors are instructed on what the individual exercises are attempting to measure. The various behaviors that make up the dimensions are explicitly articulated and assessors are asked to rate based only on whether these behaviors are observed. The methodology for scoring the exercises is addressed as well (McLauren, 2005).

It has also been argued that some candidates who belong to racial or ethnic groups, or who are female, tend to have an advantage in assessment center processes. This argument is based on the belief that diversity minded organizations seek out racial or gender minority assessors and that these assessors give preference to candidates who are most like them to ensure that the final promotional group is diverse. A sort of “affirmative action” is believed to be at play.

An extensive study of Dallas police lieutenants who were promoted based on an assessment center examined this assertion. Using data from three separate promotional tests that took place in 2001, 2005 and 2007, the variables of race and gender were controlled for. What was found is “race and gender had no significant influence on promotability” (Bishopp, 2013, p. 62).

Another perceived issue with assessment centers is that they cost too much to justify their use. Many argue that an organization can test a larger pool of candidates at a lower cost by sticking with written tests or in-house interviews. There is a large investment involved in preparing materials for an assessment, bringing in assessors, training those assessors and hosting the actual assessment center. Some might argue that a small department has too few officers to justify the assessment process or that departments in secluded rural areas cannot afford to cover the travel and lodging costs of external assessors. These concerns are not entirely unfounded. In his study of the Dallas lieutenant promotions, Bishopp (2013) found that the total cost of the three assessment centers was over \$100,000. When one considers a total of 202 candidates were tested, he or she recognizes that it costs over \$495 per candidate to complete the

assessment process. Compared to a written test this is a steep price and one that some agencies, especially smaller ones, may be hesitant to bear.

There are simply too many reasons not to judge an assessment center based solely on up-front cost though. There are high potential costs, both in terms of organizational culture and future monetary loss, which could be incurred if one is not utilized. These costs are often unforeseen and can have drastic effects.

Settlements in lawsuits resulting from officer misconduct can range into the millions of dollars. One of the main allegations leveled in these lawsuits is failure to supervise on the part of the agency. Ruiz, Ruiz, and Martinez (2011) note that leaders in an organization can directly impact the job performance of subordinates. Relying on a promotional process that has been empirically shown to measure the leadership capabilities needed to perform in a supervisory role is the only option.

In addition, failure to identify and promote the best leaders can negatively affect the culture of the organization. Many departments are currently experiencing massive attrition and are seeing the investment they made in these departing officers wasted. In some cases, these officers are leaving due to the way they perceive the treatment they receive. Dwayne Orrick (2008) observes, "The number one internal factor affecting an employee's decision to stay or leave a job is the relationship he or she has with his or her immediate supervisor" (Turnover section, para. 12). Utilizing an assessment center therefore, can deliver short and long-term benefits.

RECOMMENDATION

It is clear that failing to use the most efficient, fair and defensible method for making promotions to supervisory positions is a necessity for police organizations.

Continuing to rely on antiquated methods such as cognitive ability tests or internal oral interview boards will leave organizations open to a litany of challenges in terms of both real and perceived fairness issues. Cognitive tests cannot accurately measure the job-related behaviors needed for the potential promotional processes. Testing knowledge or departmental regulations or codified laws cannot measure the skills needed following promotion. Oral interview boards rely far too heavily on past success and are clearly open to the biased perceptions of commanders who have preconceived images of the candidate. Officers do not perceive them as being fundamentally fair and, even when competing candidates are satisfied with the final selection; there is no way to predict the future success of the persons chosen.

All police organizations should adopt a formalized assessment center process to correct these deficiencies and should utilize assessors external to the department. This process, combined with a written test to guarantee that candidates are familiar with organizational policy, but the assessment ought to be given at least equal weight in the promotional decision. There are several steps, which should be followed to assure that this process is implemented correctly. Each is vital to ensuring the validity and defensibility of the promotional decision.

Departments should establish a list of core competencies, or fundamental behaviors, that every person who fills a position should exhibit. An extensive study of the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) that are indispensable in the position should be created to identify any duties that are unique to the particular department. If, for example, sergeants in a given department are asked to perform duties not required in other departments these should be included. Once core competencies are identified,

exercises should be chosen and designed to ensure they measure for multiple competencies. From here a ratings system that captures these competencies should be created. It has been suggested (Lance, 2008; Petrides et al., 2010) that assessment centers redesign their ratings systems to focus on observed tasks or role based behaviors and move away from dimensional ratings. Though assessment centers in their current form are valid indicators of future role success, this change would further correct for perceived construct validity concerns. Given that police supervision involves both a managerial and an operational component, it is advised that a structured in-box and a tactical scenario be included at a minimum. Other exercises can be added to these two, but these should be the baseline.

Attracting panel members who are at or above the rank of the position being tested for is the focus of the assessor selection. These panels, ideally, will reflect the diversity of the community that is served by the department. These individuals should be external to the organization and steps taken to ensure they are not familiar with the candidates. Once selected, assessors are given notice of which specific behaviors they are to look for and base their ratings on. Additionally, training is provided on the most common rater biases and how to avoid them.

To assist candidates in being successful in the assessment center a list of the behaviors or core competencies, and how they will be measured, will be provided prior to the assessment date. Candidate's scores will also be published as soon as possible following the completion of the assessment. Delaying the distribution of final ratings could decrease the transparency of the process in the eyes of candidates, providing perceptions that the system is no better than the biased one that may have preceded it.

To make assessment centers more feasible for smaller departments, either in terms of manpower or budget, there are a few options. First, memorandums of understanding (MOU) could be put into place, whereby neighboring agencies will agree to send their officers to act as assessors free of charge in exchange for reciprocity. Another option is for multiple departments to hold a regional assessment center where each sends two or more candidates and the cost distributed amongst the agencies. The same panel could rate officers on the same dates and rank ordered lists of their officers provided to each individual agency. This would require departments to identify in advance personnel who may be considered for promotion but would substantially reduce expenditures. Finally, if agencies are unwilling or unable to participate in MOUs or regional assessments, they could forego promotions until at least two candidates for the supervisory position are eligible. Not all agencies could do this, but departments too small to do so might reconsider whether they have the necessity of promoting to the rank they seek to fill in the first place.

The changing world that police departments operate in will no longer allow for the thinking of yesterday when it comes to the selection of supervisors. A prudent 21st century organization will recognize that protecting itself from leadership failures and the collateral effects that stem from them is essential. Adoption of a formal assessment center, therefore, is the only course of action.

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